DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 307 EA 019 371

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|---|---|
| AUTHOR | Lauderdale, William Burt |
| TITLE | Educational Reform: The Forgotten Half. Fastback 252. |
| INSTITUTION | Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington, Ind. |
| REPORT NO | ISBN-0-87367-252-6 |
| PUB DATE | 87 |
| NOTE | 40p.; Publication of this fastback was sponsored by the Clearwater-St. Petersburg Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa. |
| AVAILABLE FROM | Publication Sales, Phi Delta Kappa, Eighth Street & Union Avenue, Box 789, Bloomington, IN 47402 ($.90; quantity discounts). |
| PUB TYPE | Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Historical Materials (060) |
| EDRS PRICE | MF01/PC02 Plus Postage. |
| DESCRIPTORS | Change Agents; *Educational Change; *Educational History; Educational Opportunities; Educational Responsibility; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Progressive Education; Role of Education; Thematic Approach; *United States History |
| IDENTIFIERS | Common Education; Equity Theory; *Excellence in Education; Social Justice |

ABSTRACT

By examining the trends in equity and academic excellence, this monograph interprets America's history of educational reform. The first section, "The Legacy of Reform," analyzes themes after colonial times. William Penn and Benjamin Franklin advocated humanitarian, middle-class education following the American Revolution. By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the nation sensed an urgency about schooling. Thomas Jefferson advanced opportunities by state-financed schools. The competing social forces of frontier and industrial expansion developed the common school movement; Horace Mann increased support for public education. The dialectic between classical European excellence and equity, however, did not produce equality of opportunity. Progressive education, the 20th century's major ideology, broadened schooling's role through individual student focus and open, democratic classrooms promoted by John Dewey. "Contemporary Reform Issues," section 2, concludes that equity and academic excellence often coexist as traditional dichotomies, but can attain resolution. Desegregation demonstrates commitment to comprehensive equity. Expanded opportunities require time; reforms should not ignore schools' increased responsibilities. If "A Nation at Risk" became the national agenda, disadvantaged students would be left in the wake. Rather than through national mandate, the alternative is a pluralistic approach wherein local experiments encourage excellence. The quality of educational change is ultimately measured by the principle of just treatment for all. (CJH)

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# Educational Reform: The Forgotten Half

William Burt Lauderdale

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EA

# Educational Reform: The Forgotten Half

by
William Burt Lauderdale

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 86-63882
ISBN 0-87367-252-6
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Bloomington, Indiana

This fastback is sponsored by the Clearwater-St. Petersburg Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa, which made a generous contribution toward publication costs.

The chapter sponsors this fastback to honor Fred Cekau, a chapter member who served as PDK Area Coordinator for the west-central region of Florida from 1980 to 1986.

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# Introduction

Reports of educational decadence have received such widespread media attention that their claims have become conventional wisdom. Public reaction has been to lobby hard for political intervention to impose more rigorous standards on students and teachers alike. As a result, it is rare for political platforms in state and national campaigns not to include a promise of major educational reform. Educators who work to establish boundaries of professional autonomy in the decision-making process about schooling find their efforts frustrated and their motives questioned.

A beleaguered education profession can ill afford to dismiss outside attacks as mere carping any more than it can simply assume a defensive posture in an effort at retrenchment. For one thing, present-day critics are deadly serious, and they often work with a zeal not easily deterred. More important, their motives are frequently sound, and their positions are not without merit.

Current recommendations for reform are advanced by different constituencies with varied agenda. But despite the differences, common themes are clearly evident. For example, almost all the proponents of reform make frequent references to *A Nation at Risk*, the benchmark reform proposal published in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk* set both the tone and substance for the current debate. It has provoked discontent with

education in the same way that the launching of Sputnik served to promote similar sentiments just three decades ago. As if the very title of the work were not adequate to alert the citizenry to a clear and present danger, the authors sought to erase all doubts of a national emergency with the proposition that "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

Supporting evidence for these claims of a national crisis includes the decline of SAT scores since 1963, the high percentage of functionally illiterate Americans, the dramatic rise in remedial courses in colleges, the lack of "higher order" intellectual skills demonstrated by teenagers, and the low status of American students when ranked academically with young people from other industrialized nations. The Commission's recommendations include strengthening high school graduation requirements, raising college admissions standards, devoting more time to the New Basics, and improving the quality of teacher preparation programs.

There is no doubt that this is an important time in the history of American education. A broad spectrum of determined professional and lay people are working to reorder one of our most enduring institutions. One hopes that their response to the need for reform will be a measured one and will address areas of difficulty without abandoning that which is right and good in our schools. As Gregory Anrig, president of Educational Testing Service, observed, "History will not judge us well if education reform in the 1980s reaches its goal of improved achievement at the expense of the gains in equity earned so slowly and painfully over the past twenty years" (1986).

It is not the first time that reforming American schools has been a national priority. There are issues currently under debate that bear a striking resemblance to those in past eras of public controversy. However, each wave of criticism is fashioned by a unique cultural circumstance and carries arguments that must be addressed anew by those who have a sustained investment in the quality of schooling.

To better understand the current reform proposals, it is important to put them in historical perspective. The struggle for equity in edu-

cation took root very early in the American experience, and the last 20 years marks an era of some promise for segments of our population whose rights to an education have long been ignored or intentionally violated. But many current reform proposals pit quality against equity and promote a narrow policy of academic excellence that serves only the privileged class.

This fastback will examine the history of reform efforts in American education from Colonial times to the present. Current reform proposals will be discussed in light of these historical trends to see how they address the important issue of equity. The legitimacy of current reform proposals must be determined in large measure by their influence on social justice for all the constituencies served by the public schools.

## The Legacy of Reform

Reform has been a major theme throughout the history of American education. From the time of the first European colonists, there have been debates over educational purpose, curriculum, methods, and who shall be taught.

### Colonial Times

The early immigrants brought a relatively simple notion of learning to the New World, a notion shaped in an essentially European tradition and grounded almost entirely in religious convictions. This circumstance was especially true in the New England colonies, all of which established town schools in the seventeenth century to provide religious instruction as well as the rudiments of reading, writing, and ciphering to the young Puritans – boys and girls alike. Usually supported by private donations, public land grants, and fees charged to parents, education also was available for the poor, who frequently were exempt from tuition. Secondary education was patterned after the English grammar schools, with a very narrow classical curriculum suited to the preparation of boys for higher education.

The Massachusetts General Court set precedent in 1647 for all other New England colonies by requiring towns of a certain size to provide instruction at both the elementary and secondary levels. That law had a religious purpose and was a response to the belief that "one

chief project of that old deluder, Satan, [is] to keep men from knowledge of the Scriptures" (Cremin 1970, p. 181). For the same reason Harvard College was established in 1636 to ensure an adequate supply of Puritan pastors.

The Middle Colonies were settled initially by a much more diverse contingent of colonists than those who sought refuge and hope in New England. Their European backgrounds allowed for a pluralistic expression of political thought, religious faith, social tradition, and language usage. However, such pluralism did not foster the unified support for education that was the hallmark of the New England system. Compared to their northern neighbors, the efforts of the Middle Colonies to formalize education appear fragmented and reflect uneven periods of progress.

The lack of substantial centralized political and religious authority for the four Middle Colonies left educational initiatives to the discretion of family units, religious sects, and private schools. What was lost in efficiency and order, however, must be measured against the opportunities made for multiple expressions of educational commitment. The Middle Colonies established a variety of denominational schools, and the nation ultimately benefited from the experiences of these religious groups as each struggled to preserve its own heritage through instruction of its young.

As the Colonial Period ended with the American Revolution, the movement toward educational reform became evident; and the Middle Colonies left a lasting impression on the direction that reform was to take. The social, economic, and intellectual climate certainly provided the thrust for change. The European Enlightenment, commercialism, mercantilism, and a rising middle class all helped create circumstances in which formalized study in secular and utilitarian subjects became mandatory; and private schools that responded to these needs took root in all the American colonies. But it was two eminent Pennsylvania gentlemen who set high standards for this reform movement and gave promise to citizens long excluded from the benefits of an education.

When Pennsylvania's General Assembly adopted William Penn's second Frame of Government in 1683, it publicly affirmed his politi-

cal commitment to the cause of a practical education for all children. The provisions of his act required all parents to provide their young with elementary learning to address spiritual concerns. It further sanctioned the need for instruction in "some useful trade or skill, that the poor may work to live, and the rich if they become poor may not want" (Cohen 1974, p. 181). Here the Quaker Penn was advancing an important theme in educational reform to which his fellow Friends would give shape in eighteenth-century educational practice.

That theme would include a useful and "cheerful" education for all boys and girls, rich and poor, black, white, and Indians alike. Although higher education efforts suffered as elementary education prospered as a result of the Quakers' plain and simple educational ends, their message on behalf of the disenfranchised was very well timed for a nation that would soon be forced to devise laws affecting all citizens, without benefit of European authority and responsibility. If in their Quaker zeal they drew an anti-elitist and anti-classical orientation almost to the point of anti-intellectualism, their humanitarian efforts provided a needed alternative to an educational system that both assumed and accepted discrimination by class, sex, and race.

It is important to remember that this was the era in which John Locke was setting the tone for education in England by proposing refined and privileged instruction for the gentility while recommending, in an official commission report, the impressment of pauper children at age three in workhouses to learn skills that would earn suitable profits for their employers. Less than two decades prior to Locke's report, William Penn was legislating publicly the very same education for the poor that he was providing privately for his own children. The gulf between the sentiments of Locke and Penn would not be lost during two centuries of American debate on the proper direction for educational change, and it should not be lost on those who now debate educational reform.

Another gentleman to influence educational reform in Pennsylvania was Benjamin Franklin. His primary constituency was the rising middle class, a revolutionary class "creating not only a new economic structure, [but] also creating new cultural values which were competing with those inherited from the feudal past" (Curti 1959, p. 40).

It is important to recall that the eighteenth-century middle-class value structure included a significant element of humanitarianism. Franklin worked hard on behalf of the poor and against slavery.

Franklin's contribution to education included a combination of proposals to advance practical study and efforts to blunt his contemporaries' "unaccountable prejudice in favor of ancient customs and habitudes." He established the Philadelphia Academy in 1751 as one attempt to provide an alternative to programs dominated by Latin and classical studies. A number of subjects were included in the Academy on the basis of their practicality and their reliance on experimental science. English was given a central role not only because of its usefulness but also to promote a sense of nationalism through education.

## The National Period

Although the roots of educational reform extend to the Colonial Period, it was in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries that a sense of urgency developed regarding the importance of schooling to the national welfare. As the various political, ethnic, and religious constituencies laid claim to rights of self-determination, concerned citizens of national prominence turned to education as the instrument for forging a commitment to common interests. Noah Webster argued for universal education to ensure the passage of just laws, attempted to Americanize the English language through the publication of a spelling book and dictionary, and scolded fellow citizens who sent their offspring to study in foreign lands. The noted physician Benjamin Rush proposed an American system of education on the ground that "The principle of patriotism stands in need of the reinforcement of prejudice." To mold the disparate loyalties of the American populace, the Reverend Samuel Knox promoted a system of national public academies and colleges as well as a national university.

It was Thomas Jefferson who most impressively addressed the issue of educational reform as a condition of national sovereignty. Although not as enduring or as well known a contribution to education

as "Mr. Jefferson's University," his "Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge" represented a remarkable effort for the times in which it was proposed and set a precedent for the use of schooling to advance democratic ideals. This legislative package was submitted to and defeated by the Virginia Legislature in 1779, but Jefferson kept the principles embodied in the bill alive and before the public for nearly five decades thereafter.

The legislation provided for a free elementary education for every white child in Virginia, with provisions for selecting the few most able scholars among the boys to advance to a Latin grammar school and eventually to a university. The intentions were to bring general enlightenment to the populace so they might better exercise their rights of government and to screen from among the poor those men of exceptional talent so they might be included in the ranks of those who govern.

Jefferson's attempt to break new ground in educational opportunity for the needy through state-financed schools was truly radical in the eighteenth century. Those who now claim allegiance to egalitarian principles are forever in his debt. But it would be remiss to ignore Jefferson's silence on certain perennial issues of social justice.

Obviously, Thomas Jefferson was not blind to color or sex when searching for talent among the masses. Only white males were the ultimate beneficiaries in his educational plan. Compulsory education was never considered, leaving to pure chance the opportunity of the poor to experience success in academic achievement. He ignored the needs and interests of a major portion of the agrarian and middle-class population through the promotion of a Latin grammar school education, which gave absolute priority to literary and classical studies. And he seemed oblivious to the unfair advantage of wealth, which secured for the privileged a place in higher learning regardless of talent. Jefferson's disregard for class advantage is made even more grating when juxtaposed with his wording, to "rake from the rubbish" the best of those who were disadvantaged. Though less blatant today, the issues of social class, sex, and race are still very relevant to current educational reform efforts; and to be silent on them in the twentieth century seems far less excusable than it was 200 years ago.

## The Common School Movement

Educational reform had a very distinct character in the National Period when it became politically expedient to expand opportunities for formal instruction on behalf of republican ideals. However, change also was an evolutionary process resulting from myriad social and economic factors and without benefit of mobilized political and intellectual forces calling attention to some immediate need.

By the late Colonial Period, the factors of a developing middle class, commercialism, and industrial expansion were beginning to exert pressure on schools to incorporate a more practical curriculum with more varied purposes. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, a new spirit was created by a rural and western frontier, which produced a fiercely independent, practical, and courageous lot who were suspicious of governmental authority, disdainful of a classical education, and openly hostile to the educational preferences of a privileged class. These populists became a formidable coalition, supporting a commonsense and practical elementary education and expressing little need for or appreciation of higher learning. At the same time, labor organizations were developing in urban centers, and their members began to close ranks against an industrial system that they perceived as responsible for their wretched working conditions and insensitive to their miserable living conditions. As class conflict intensified, violence erupted in the cities; and the business community came to view education as a promising instrument for establishing order among the masses and possibly even making them more economically productive.

With industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and westward migration came a web of religious, intellectual, political, and class conflicts. Remarkably, the incredible turmoil of this period, with its melange of competing social forces, gave rise to one of the most important educational reform efforts in our history – the common school movement. Those committed to the improvement of schools today would do well to refresh their memories on the contributions of Horace Mann, America's consummate advocate for social justice through education.

Horace Mann parlayed his very humble beginnings into an extraordinarily successful career, which in no way made him insensitive to those unable to do likewise. He had established, at a very young age, a position of prestige and power in Massachusetts. His political accomplishments included a solid record of state legislative work that frequently addressed the needs of those who lacked political power. At the age of 36, his life was forever altered by the death of his 23-year-old wife. That tragic event devastated Mann and drained him of political ambition, which in turn quickly eroded his effectiveness as a leader in the state senate. Because of his long history of sustained work on behalf of the disenfranchised, his friends encouraged him to accept a post in 1837 as Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. They thought that in taking the position, it would revitalize his activist tendencies through association with a moral cause to improve the circumstances and opportunities for all young people and especially those who were poor.

As seen by Mann, the scope of that moral cause required nothing less than fundamental and immediate educational reform, which was no mean task. Massachusetts, one of the more progressive states of that era, was nonetheless plagued by general apathy toward the education of its youth. Responsibility for providing public instruction was essentially located with isolated groups of individual families, and only about one out of three children had an opportunity to attend school even occasionally during the year. When formal instruction was available, the quality of teaching typically ranged from lackluster to incompetent.

When Mann accepted the post as Secretary of the Board of Education, his primary leverage for gaining political and financial support for more and better schools was the alarming growth of social unrest. Racial strife, political friction, and religious conflict had become acute. But most critical to Mann's cause was the clear and insidious specter of class struggle. The gap between the rich and the poor was widening; uncompromising lines of opposition were being drawn by both sides. The poor were beginning to organize; street violence in urban centers was becoming commonplace. The ugliness of the French Revolution was still fresh in the minds of the American people, and

Mann played on their anxiety in his repeated calls for an education that would diminish hostilities between those who were well off and those who were not.

During his 12 years as secretary, Mann drove himself with an unrelenting and even punishing work schedule in his personal crusade for common schools. As Lawrence Cremin has so aptly noted, his vision was that schools be common "not in the traditional European sense of a school for the common people but in a new sense of a school common to all people" (Cremin 1957, p. 8). It was for this uniquely American interpretation of a common school that Mann campaigned by seeking support from powerful business interests, by lobbying influential political figures, by organizing teachers' conventions, by founding a professional journal, by establishing public normal schools, and by kindling the social conscience of the massive readership of his annual reports.

> His twelve annual reports to the Board range far and wide through the field of pedagogy, eloquently stating the case for the public school and insightfully discussing its problems. The cogency of their analysis is measured by their striking relevance today; to peruse them is to consider some of the most fundamental problems of contemporary American education. (Cremin 1957, p. 7)

Because Mann's problems are precisely our problems, we should remember his efforts and heed his moral convictions. He was no prophet; and in retrospect, we can identify certain of his blind spots to social injustice and accept with understanding his naiveté about the potential of education to reconstruct fundamentally a complex and dynamic society. But he was right in believing that educational reform in a democracy must accommodate those who were denied access to formal learning because of financial circumstance and because of an environment that discouraged academic achievement.

When Horace Mann argued that the seeds of excellence are implanted "equally in the mind of the ignorant peasant, and in the mind of the most profound philosopher," he was setting a tone for educational reform that demanded equity for both peasant and philosopher. When contemporary commission reports focus on standardized test

scores, college admission requirements, and teacher accountability, they may inadvertently set a tone for educational reform that ignores social equity and even works to create a permanent underclass of "ignorant peasants."

Horance Mann's efforts in behalf of the common school movement resulted in substantial increases in state appropriations and local taxes during his term as Secretary of the Board of Education. The training of teachers and their salaries improved significantly; there was widespread school consolidation; the length of the school term more than doubled; and financial allocations shifted dramatically away from private schools in favor of public education. More than two million dollars were appropriated for school buildings and equipment. But Mann's most important contribution was that the Massachusetts experience set a precedent for similar movements in other states, and America benefited immensely from a vigorous common school movement throughout the nineteenth century.

## The Industrial Revolution

By the mid-nineteenth century, educational reform in America generally was defined by three issues that captured the attention of educational reformers as far back as the late Colonial Period: the role education could play in promoting democracy, establishing public order, and accommodating commercial interests. However, reform measures meant to address those issues often were caught in the same thicket of controversy and disagreement as are proposals to improve schooling today. Problems engendered by sectarian religious beliefs, diverse ethnic groups, various social classes, rural and urban differences, and the politics of school governance mired attempts to promote the cause of universal education. These problems were not unique to the American experience. What was unique was the way a frontier nation of immigrants would deal with them.

Class distinctions were so embedded in the European psyche that John Locke could address educational reform for the privileged class and for the poor as though they were two entirely separate issues.

But class distinctions had never solidified in the United States as they had over centuries in the original homelands of its citizens, and Americans were unwilling to accept an education inferior to the kind provided for those born to wealth and power. What was unique in the American education experience was the development of one institution to serve all classes.

The common school movement initiated by Horace Mann extended the philosophy of the common school beyond the primary level to secondary and higher education. In Europe there long had been schools for the privileged and charity schools for the poor, but the difference in the American experience was the development of institutions that cross social barriers, address economic interests, and accommodate political realities. Creating such an institution required constant compromise between forces attempting to maintain an elitist and classical education and those fostering practical education inspired by both frontier populism and an expanding middle class.

The Latin grammar school was replaced by the more practically oriented academy, which in turn was soon overshadowed by public high schools. High schools offered a broadened curriculum that included commercial and vocational courses and offered comprehensive programs for both college entrance and the world of work.

In higher education, some of the most prestigious universities, previously offering solely classical studies, began to bend to pressures to include courses in history, political science, sociology, anthropology, and economics. They began to offer modern languages, experimented with elective systems, instituted professional studies, and established schools of science. Their new-found flexibility was encouraged by competition from neophyte state colleges, whose utilitarian focus found favor with a broadened constituency of young scholars. Innovations in the accommodation of the various needs of specific groups would later lead to the creation of junior colleges, extension courses, agricultural experiment stations, and "A&M" state colleges. Higher education for women and opportunities for blacks increasingly, if only sporadically, received national attention. And at the apex of American ingenuity in post-secondary education stands the Morrill Act of 1862 establishing Land Grant colleges, which forcefully

acknowledged the right and responsibility of higher education to serve directly the needs of the whole commonwealth.

As we look back on this heritage, it would be easy but unfair to draw caricatures of those who represented the two dominant philosophies in influencing education in America. Those who defended the Western European tradition of classical education were not necessarily insensitive to the plight of the common people, nor were they interested only in catering to the needs of the academically elite and economically powerful. And the populists and middle-class aspirants were not out to corrupt the spirit of the humanities by advocating practical courses and vocational programs. The true genius of the American experience resides in the attempts on both sides to assimilate the varied purposes, integrate new and traditional course offerings, and open opportunities to a wider audience of American youth.

The dialectic between the two major philosophic orientations produced a montage of educational practice that well served a country striving for international greatness yet struggling with lingering social inequities. That dialectic did not produce equality of educational opportunity, but neither did it galvanize class distinctions that would deter social and economic progress for those not born to privilege.

## Progressive Reform in the Twentieth Century

Progressive education represents a major and sustained effort to reform the schools in the twentieth century. As an organized movement, it dissipated rather quietly in the 1950s; but the residue of its successes is evident today in educational thought and practice. The ideological roots of progressive education were established firmly in the latter half of the nineteenth century by those who looked to the schools to prepare children and youth to function effectively in a modern industrialized and increasingly urbanized society.

To the progressive educator, traditional education, with its limited purpose and emphasis on accumulation of subject matter and adult-directed learning, no longer seemed appropriate. In a stable agrarian society, schooling was supplemental to, and frequently unnecessary

for, a meaningful, secure, and productive life. But with mass immigration, sprawling cities, factory labor, ethnic ghettos, street violence, and dislocated families, there was need for a new education to prepare the young to cope with novel and ever-changing environments.

Progressive reform efforts began with attempts to broaden the school's role. Attention to vocational education was a central feature of their recommendations. For some this meant using the schools for job training; for others, like John Dewey, it meant the study of occupations as a central instructional theme to develop in young people the ability to appreciate and cope with an increasingly complex social and economic environment. The health needs of the students were to be served, and schools were to act as a resource for total community development.

Group problem solving was encouraged to prepare students to work with others of different backgrounds and abilities. Progressive educators stressed learning through experience, connecting classroom instruction to activities outside the school, and building on the needs and interests of students. Teachers were seen as guides rather than taskmasters; and they were held responsible for the emotional, physical, cognitive, and psychological well-being of children. Most importantly, progressives challenged the teacher-dominated traditional classroom and called for a more democratic classroom atmosphere.

John Dewey, in speculating on the advantages of a more open, democratic classroom environment, cogently asked:

> Can we find any reason that does not ultimately come down to the belief that democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience, one which is more widely accessible and enjoyed, than do non-democratic and anti-democratic forms of social life? Does not the principle of regard for individual freedom and for decency and kindliness of human relations come back in the end to the conviction that these things are tributary to a higher quality of experience on the part of a greater number than are methods of repression and coercion or force? Is it not the reason for our preference that we believe that mutual consultation and convictions reached through persuasion, make possible a better quality of experience than can otherwise be provided on any wide scale? (1938, p. 34)


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The quality of the experience of the American classroom has certainly changed over the last few decades, and in no small measure the differences reflect the efforts of progressive educators. Especially in the elementary and early childhood classrooms, where progressives focused their efforts, a friendly and open atmosphere usually prevails. Students often participate in decisions that affect them, plan many of their own learning activities, and move about freely as they work. A substantial part of the program tends to be individualized. Relations between the teacher and students are often informal. One of the most dramatic innovations, vigorously encouraged over the years by progressive educators, was attention to health needs of students through such efforts as physical examinations, maintenance of health records, nutritionally balanced school lunches, and the availability of innoculation programs.

The success of progressivism was never of such magnitude that it dominated public education. But progressives did make a difference, and they did it through a consciousness-raising effort centered on the only concern that matters: the individual child. George Counts, a critic of much of their platform, conceded that point in 1932.

> They have focused attention squarely upon the child; they have recognized the fundamental importance of the interest of the learner; they have defended the thesis that activity lies at the root of all true education; they have conceived learning in terms of life situations and growth of character; they have championed the rights of the child as a free personality.

Progressive education truly represented an ideological reform movement in American education. Much of the agenda of current reform efforts will test the strength of its most fundamental tenets.

## Contemporary Reform Issues

Educational reform in America never has been tidy, but there have been patterns of continuity reflected in two major traditions. The first were the attempts to accommodate and open opportunities for the varied constituencies that make up an immigrant nation. We can still look to the sponsors of those reforms for lessons in ways that social justice can be served by education. Penn, Franklin, Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey are among those sponsors who launched reform efforts out of their concern for both the common good and for the plight of the disenfranchised.

The second major tradition providing continuity in educational reform since the Colonial Period was the inherited Western European ideal of academic excellence that produces a literate and cultured person – one whose life is infused with the world of ideas, an appreciation of the arts, and the acceptance of civic responsibility. For three centuries this tradition has given stability to our educational institutions as well as providing a cadre of leaders in all walks of life.

These two traditions, a concern for equity and a commitment to academic excellence, are by no means mutually exclusive. Yet historically, arguments on behalf of each have been couched in ways that make them seem imcompatible. Such dichotomous views are vividly illustrated by two recent benchmark events in American education:

the passing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. These two events – occurring less than two decades apart – symbolically represent the polarity of views on what should be the national priorities for education.

With the signing of ESEA, President Johnson clearly set his priority as serving the underprivileged. Through the five Titles in ESEA, federal funds were made available to school districts for assistance in the development of libraries, instructional materials, educational centers, and for research, as well as for the training of teachers to deal with children who come from culturally different and economically deprived circumstances. The most widely heralded part of ESEA was Title I, a comprehensive reading program for economically disadvantaged children. In little more than a decade after ESEA was signed, one out of every four federal dollars spent on education would go to programs designed to assist underprivileged children.

With the enactment of ESEA, President Johnson was able to change abruptly the national priorities for education in America. His administration had come on the heels of one of the most organized and virulent attacks on education in American history. With the post-World War II era of strident anticommunist campaigns, the schools were accused of being the handmaiden of communist efforts to corrupt the will of the American people. Progressive educators were accused of mollycoddling the young through child-centered methods, permissive attitudes, and "life-adjustment" education. With the launching of Sputnik in 1957, critics of public education demanded a return to the basics with emphasis on science and mathematics. They praised the European and Soviet Union educational systems for their rigor and touted the ability group track system of their secondary schools. And most ardently, the critics insisted that more attention be given to the academically talented. According to the critics, America had become a second-class power because its educational system had grown soft. Given this climate of criticism of public education, it is remarkable that President Johnson, under the banner of "The Great Society," could establish equality of educational opportunity as a national priority in place of academic excellence.

Just two decades later it was *A Nation at Risk* that set in motion a spirited national dialogue on the failures of public education and a call for higher standards, accountability, and academic excellence. Is it any wonder that the educational establishment currently is disoriented, trying to ferret out what is expected and what direction to take?

The thrust of those who prepared *A Nation at Risk* shifted away from the concerns of the critics of the 1950s about threats to world political domination to the issue of international economic standing in the world's marketplace. They report that Japanese build better automobiles, South Koreans construct better steel mills, and Germans make better machine tools today than do Americans. Further, they maintain our intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths as a democratic people are being jeopardized by what they term the "rising tide of mediocrity" in public education.

The indicators of mediocrity cover a broad cross section of our student population. In *A Nation at Risk* it is reported that American students do not fare well in international comparisons on academic tests; the average achievement of high school students on standardized tests is now lower than it was two decades earlier; gifted students are not performing commensurate with their ability; 40% of minority students are functionally illiterate. Average SAT scores have fallen between 1963 and 1980; only one-fifth of 17-year-olds can write a persuasive essay; science achievement scores have steadily declined between 1969 and 1977. One-fourth of all mathematics courses now taught in four-year colleges are remedial in nature. Both business and the military are spending millions of dollars annually on training programs in basic skills. The Commission concludes:

> It is important, of course, to recognize that *the average citizen* today is better educated and more knowledgeable than the average citizen of a generation ago – more literate, and exposed to more mathematics, literature, and science. The positive impact of this fact on the well-being of our country and the lives of our people cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, *the average graduate* of our schools and colleges today is not as well-educated as the average graduate of 25 or 35 years ago, when a much smaller proportion of our population completed high

> school and college. The negative impact of this fact likewise cannot be overstated. (p. 11)

As the proportion of students who stay in school increases, one can assume that achievement levels will decline. It would be as misleading to interpret that decline as a "rising tide of mediocrity" as it would be wrong to assume that the decline can fully be attributed to the increased proportion of students in school. Further, it seems unfair to condemn without qualification the increase in remedial courses if the average citizen today is in fact better educated than a generation ago. To be fair in any assessment of these issues requires that we look beyond the concerns expressed in *A Nation at Risk*.

## Cultural Demands and Student Achievement

There is no date that stands as a more important landmark in the history of American education than 1954, when *Brown* v. *Board of Education* struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine established by *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*. However, those who expected a massive restructuring of schools to eradicate institutionalized racism after *Brown* were to be disappointed. The tactics used by certain school districts across the nation to avoid desegregation orders were impressive, and their efforts played havoc with more than just the courts. The longer communities struggled with local compliance problems, the more political factions polarized and human relations suffered.

The 1971 Supreme Court decision that broke the legal stalemate was *Swann* v. *Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*. As Wiley Branton points out:

> for the first time the Supreme Court actually directed the district court to provide specific types of remedies, including student transportation, to school desegregation plaintiffs. When we speak of the effort to desegregate public schools we are not speaking of a 30-year effort; we are speaking of a 15-year effort. And contrary to popular belief, that effort has produced great success. (1986, p. 1080)

The *Swann* decision unleashed sweeping changes in schools that affected students, faculty, and parents. Redistricting of schools, forced

busing, boycotts, white flight, teacher resignations, superintendent dismissals, school board realignments, violence, and litigation all became regular fare on evening television news. Less newsworthy was the steady dismantling of segregated facilities by law-abiding citizens – some grudgingly, others enthusiastically.

In 1968, 64.2% of black students in the public schools in the United States attended schools that were 90% to 100% minority. By 1980, only 33.2% of black students were attending nearly all-minority schools. Although across the nation segregation of black students declined significantly between 1968 and 1980, the most striking decreases occurred in the South. In 1963, 98% of black students in the South were in all-black schools. By 1968, 77.8% of black students in the South were attending minority schools. By 1980, the percentage of black students in nearly all-minority schools had been reduced dramatically to 23% (Orfield 1983).

Admittedly, success in desegregating schools has been uneven. Those regions that previously had dual school systems have shown significantly more progress than those where the residential patterns keep the races apart. While busing has proved to be the most effective means for addressing the latter situation, it is not a completely satisfactory solution; and it is vociferously opposed by a large segment of our population. Nevertheless, progress has been substantial. In fact, history offers few illustrations of such a massive reordering of a complex institution in such a short period of time.

Researchers are not able to isolate the actual impact of desegregation on academic performance, but the fact that our schools have been able to absorb such an immense transformation and continue to function effectively is a credit to the strength of the institution. It would be a credit to educational reformers if they would acknowledge that strength, show patience with schools as they work out the disorders, and demonstrate a willingness to address in their reports the complex social and racial problems facing teachers in their classrooms.

Another law that addresses equity in education and also further complicates the life of classroom teachers is Public Law 94-142, passed in 1975. This legislation requires schools to establish the least restrictive environment for handicapped children, which in many cases

means mainstreaming in the regular classroom. Through courses and inservice programs, teachers have learned how to deal with the special problems and needs of a constituency they never faced before. Further, the law mandates that the teacher provide an individually tailored program for each handicapped child. Teachers must coordinate their efforts with school administrators, parents, and professionals with expertise in working with handicapped students.

A strong case can be made that the placement of these special students in a regular classroom provides benefits not only to them but also to their teachers and their nonhandicapped classmates. The point is, however, that neither in its indictment of our schools nor in its recommendations for reform does *A Nation at Risk* acknowledge the extra burden placed on teachers by these new circumstances. If the public mandates new and broader responsibilities for teachers, it must be patient in its demands for excellence.

Another important factor influencing public education today is that America remains a nation of immigrants with diverse cultural backgrounds. In our national birthday celebrations, be they for the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, or the Statue of Liberty, we look back with nostalgia and pride on how this country was built by the efforts of foreign born masses "yearning to be free." We too easily forget that immigration continues to be a major factor in the life of our nation.

Fully one-fourth of our population growth today is accounted for by immigration; and although immigration quotas are established by law, refugee provisions of the law extend those numbers far beyond the official quota. Vietnamese, Cuban, and Haitian refugees recently have increased the immigration count dramatically; and about one-half to three-quarters of a million people are now legally added to the U.S. population annually. Not included in that count are illegal aliens and immediate relatives of U.S. citizens.

Immigration has a direct impact on what happens in the classroom. Immigrant children bring not only very different cultural styles and ways of looking at the world but also language problems that significantly influence the instructional program. For example, of the one-half million Southeast Asian refugees that have immigrated to the

United States since the fall of Saigon, 50% are school-age children, with an estimated 75% of them illiterate in their native language. Even though Title VII programs in bilingual education have served more than 250,000 children a year, the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education estimates that 3½ million children could benefit from bilingual programs in the United States. Multiple language problems have become so acute that a number of states are considering, or have already passed, legislation that mandates measures to preserve and enhance the English language.

Mention has been made here of desegregation, special education, and bilingual and bicultural efforts to illustrate the enormous new responsibilities placed on U.S. schools in the last two decades – responsibilities that increasingly have complicated the circumstances of the teacher. Complications aside, most would concede that these have been worthy experiments in America's attempt to increase equity for all its young people. It has taken time for our schools to adjust to these new contingencies; but there already are signs that the performance of our students is beginning to improve. We must be very careful not to short-circuit the new and expanded opportunities for all our young people with reform proposals that ignore the expanded responsibilities of our schools.

## Those "Left in the Wake"

> History is not kind to idlers. The time is long past when America's destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations. The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer. (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983)

No nation may be secure; but if the authors of *A Nation at Risk* meant to imply in the above quote that America is populated by idlers,

they missed the mark and missed it badly. Americans enjoy a standard of living that is the envy of the entire world. They are protected by one of the most powerful and sophisticated military establishments in history. They are informed by a news media that is second to none in freedom, diversity, and aggressiveness. They are first in the world in gross national product, imports, and exports. No nation has a lower percentage of farmers, and yet the United States leads the world in agricultural productivity.

U.S. athletes lead the world in total Olympic medals won. The United States leads the world in Nobel prize winners, except for literature where it ranks just behind France. Even *A Nation at Risk* admits that "the proportion of Americans of college age enrolled in higher education is nearly twice that of Japan and far exceeds other nations such as France, West Germany, and the Soviet Union." They do not mention that we also have more foreign students attending our universities than anyone in the world, and they come from 60 different countries. American symphony orchestras consistently receive international acclaim; Americans have created art forms, such as jazz, that are enjoyed and imitated the world over. And the list goes on.

These are not the accomplishments of a nation of "idlers," and those who have achieved these accomplishments are not graduates of an educational system so mediocre that it would be viewed "as an act of war" had it been imposed on America by an unfriendly foreign power. But there is a dark side to the American story that is cause for concern. Barbara Ehrenreich reports that:

> there are signs that America is becoming a more divided society: over the last decade, the rich have been getting richer; the poor have been getting more numerous, and those in the middle do not appear to be doing as well as they used to. If America is "coming back," as President Reagan reassured us in the wake of the economic malaise of the early 1980s, it may be coming back in a harsh and alien form. (1986, p. 44)

Shortly after World War II, a steady equalizing trend developed in our society that, according to Ehrenreich and other economists, has experienced a sharp reversal since 1977-78. She reports that extremes of wealth are now growing further apart, to the point where

the income gap between the richest and the poorest families is now wider than it has been at any time since the Census Bureau began keeping such statistics in 1947. The magnitude of the reversal is reflected in very recent figures on the distribution of wealth and the share of the national income.

> In 1984, according to a report by Congress's Joint Economic Committee, the share of the national income received by the wealthiest 40 percent of families in the United States rose to 67.3 percent, while the poorest 40 percent received 15.7 percent (the smallest share since 1947); the share of the middle 20 percent declined to 17 percent. . . .
>
> Some economists have even predicted that the middle class, which has traditionally represented the majority of Americans and defined the nation's identity and goals, will disappear altogether, leaving the country torn, like many third-world societies, between an affluent minority and a horde of the desperately poor. (Ehrenreich 1986)

Though the statistics are alarming, we face no different circumstances now than the ones that confronted Horace Mann in the nineteenth century, Benjamin Franklin in the eighteenth century, and William Penn in the seventeenth century. It would be contrary to our entire heritage if we, as educators, ignored the new inequities and focused all our efforts on academic excellence as defined by narrow standards of accountability. If our educational reform measures actually encouraged an acceleration toward a two-tier society, a society torn "between an affluent minority and a horde of the desperately poor," the common good would not be served. And yet that possibility exists if we accept without question the recommendations of *A Nation at Risk*.

*A Nation at Risk* is not a new or imaginative approach to educational reform; rather it represents a restatement of a theme that has surfaced regularly in twentieth-century American thought. The Essentialists of the 1930s, led by William Bagley, and the critics of the 1950s, led by Hyman Rickover, Arthur Bestor, and Max Rafferty, leveled similar criticisms at American schools and proposed basically the same solutions as those suggested in 1983 by former Secretary of Education Terrel Bell's National Commission on Excellence in Edu-

cation. The document appeals to conventional wisdom and has solid historical roots. Therefore, serious attention must be given to this report that characterizes U.S. schools as mediocre, that demands in the interest of economic survival that schools focus exclusively on academic excellence.

*A Nation at Risk* offers three broad recommendations:

> *Recommendation A: Content*
>
> *We recommend* that State and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at a *minimum*, *all* students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics by taking the following curriculum during their four years of high school: (a) four years of English; (b) three years of mathematics; (c) three years of science; (d) three years of social studies; and (e) one-half year of computer science. For the college-bound, two years of foreign language in high school are strongly recommended in addition to those taken earlier.
>
> *Recommendation B: Standards and Expectations*
>
> *We recommend* that schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct, and that four-year colleges and universities raise their requirements for admission. This will help students do their best educationally with challenging materials in an environment that supports learning and authentic accomplishment.
>
> *Recommendation C: Time*
>
> *We recommend* that significantly more time be devoted to learning the New Basics. This will require more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, or a lengthened school year. (pp. 24-29)

The above recommendations apply, in an obvious way, to the top tier of our society, to those students who have a natural inclination for learning and a thirst for knowledge. The recommendations address the needs of offspring of affluent parents – youngsters who grow up in homes where books and magazines are readily accessible, who participate regularly in discussions on issues of substance,

and who travel to places that sharpen their sensibilities to a range of attitudes and ideas. The recommendations attend to the aspirations of those who rank high on standardized achievement tests, a matter of great concern to those who wrote *A Nation at Risk*. But if such recommendations become the national education agenda, who is "left in the wake"?

Left in the wake are those students whose interests are in no way served by recommendations to raise standards – students unable to cope even with current standards. It is difficult to see how making the schools more academically rigorous will help students who already are experiencing failure in academic subjects. In a society already seriously divided by extremes of wealth and poverty, should the schools become the agent to further penalize the poor?

Youngsters whose fathers are in low-level occupations already have a dropout rate double that of youngsters with fathers in high-level occupations. How are their interests served by increasing the requirements for high school graduation? Students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile already have a dropout rate three times greater than students in the highest quartile. How are their interests served by more rigorous standards for academic performance? Sophomores in the lowest quartile on standardized tests have a dropout rate six times greater than students in the highest quartile (Plisko and Stern 1985, p. 202). How are their interests served by a longer school day and a lengthened school year? Very simply, they are not. Nor are the interests of their teachers served. In fact, the problems of teachers who face daily the poor, minorities, immigrants, migrants, and the handicapped would be exacerbated if such recommendations become the national agenda for school reform.

Although we cannot ignore the academically talented nor accept lower standards in their school performance, national reform proposals that address only this segment of our student population are woefully out of touch with reality. Schools should not be immune from criticism, but the public must be made aware of the immense responsibilities imposed on teachers who must work with *all* children and youth, not just the academically talented.

## Summary

My purpose in this fastback has not been to critique in detail the various reform proposals now before the American public. Rather, my purpose has been to provide a historical perspective to the central themes and tone of those reports that have received the greatest national attention – those reforms that many people believe will be the most influential in changing the direction of education in the future. I have taken the position that public school teachers currently are doing a credible job, despite the fact that they are living through fundamental social disruptions frequently without public and administrative support, and are facing incredibly diverse constituencies in the classroom.

Admittedly, teachers cannot always overcome the social forces that contribute to the cycle of school failures of children from economically deprived families. Thus, our society must deal with 1.1 million school dropouts between the ages of 16 and 19 and a 17-year-old population in which 13% are classified as functionally illiterate. It is these circumstances that ultimately will put our nation at risk. But current reform proposals exacerbate the problem when they force us to choose between quality and equity in educational policy and promote a narrow policy of academic excellence that historically has served only the privileged class.

Such a policy permits de facto discrimination against the socially disenfranchised. Those who live in physical squalor, economically

depressed circumstances, and intellectually sterile environments will not, by some miracle, respond to calls for higher standards in those endeavors when they already are failing. The issue is not that schools should be rigorous and demand academic excellence; rather, the schools must be rigorous in carrying out a broad spectrum of social and cultural responsibilities so that *all* young people will have the opportunity to achieve academic excellence.

The alternative to the narrowly focused reform efforts typified by *A Nation at Risk* is to encourage and expand current pluralistic efforts on behalf of all children. We must explore a variety of reform approaches. Excellence cannot be mandated from outside; it must be developed from within. It must involve changes in the organizational structure of the school and in the transactions between teachers and learners. If reform is going to work for all students – rich and poor, black and white, the gifted and the slow – it will begin not by national mandate but by local initiatives, by giving teachers more autonomy, and by acknowledging the complexity of producing change.

National reform proposals can suggest, not mandate, experiments on the local level to encourage academic excellence for all students. For example, the Paideia Proposal of Mortimer Adler ("The best education for the best is the best education for all") inspired local initiatives to seek ways of fostering academic achievement for diverse populations in large metropolitan areas. There have been systematic and controlled experiments within major school systems. These initial efforts, along with adaptations for the unique circumstances of local systems, will provide insights into the new ways of addressing equal opportunity for all young people, regardless of their station in life.

Those who care deeply about public education and appreciate the rich heritage of American schooling can easily become disillusioned by the strident attacks on education from those who propose reforms yet ignore social realities. A more realistic and positive view of the school's contribution to social progress is presented by Rudder:

> Unlike the linear metaphor of progress which views the public schools as moving with or even propelling society toward some higher goal, the organismic vision of the mission of public education is one of adap-

> tation to the pressures, demands, and opportunities presented by the broader social environment. The organismic approach to public schooling sees the relationship between school and society as a living response and not as a mechanical reaction. The healthy school, like the healthy organism, lives in an encounter with its environment from which it draws nourishment for growth, absorbs pain, changes and moves differently in the face of shocks and surprises, grows ill and is healed, and through it all, displays the resilience necessary to survive and to perpetuate itself through and for the sake of future generations. (Rudder, n.d.)

Since the Colonial Period, there have been times when that resilience has worked on behalf of all young people and times when it has perpetuated inequities. Educational change will continue to be a slow and uneven process – there are no panaceas, no universal strategies to heal the institution. But the quality of our current efforts will ultimately be measured by the extent to which just treatment for all is the guiding principle of reform.

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